

12-2017

Influential Factors in the College Decision-Making Process for Chinese Students Studying in the United States

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INFLUENTIAL FACTORS IN THE COLLEGE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS
FOR CHINESE STUDENTS STUDYING IN THE UNITED STATES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Communication, Technology, and Society

by
Madeline Adele Rafi
December 2017

Accepted by
Dr. Darren Linvill, Committee Chair
Dr. Kristen Okamoto
Dr. Stephanie Pangborn
Dr. Andrew Pyle

Abstract

For more than 974,000 international students, the United States is the destination of choice to pursue higher education. Although Chinese students account for almost one in three international students in the U.S., there are many unknowns about the influential factors behind their college decision. This phenomenological study explores the self-described most important factors for Chinese students' decision to attend college in the United States and the sources they seek to make their decision. Through interviews with students originally from China who attained their undergraduate degree from a U.S. university, my goal was to understand how individuals arrive at his/her alma mater and articulate their decision-making process for attending that school. The current study found (1) parents are the most influential factor in the decision to attend college in the U.S., (2) students place great importance on *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, and (3) in hindsight, students wish they focused less on rankings and did not need help from agencies when applying to colleges.

Dedication

For my mom and dad. Thank you for everything even on the other days. But especially the days when we were making my college decision. From paying for SAT/ACT classes, crafting a detailed spreadsheet of schools to apply to and what to look for, touring college campuses, asking the right questions, applying to dozens of schools, and doing it all over again when it was time for graduate school. WE did it!

Acknowledgements

Dr. D. Lawrence Linvill, PhD, thank you for all of your constant encouragement, guidance, laughter (and maybe a few tears). I wanted you to be my committee chair since day one of graduate school orientation, and I could not be happier I tricked you into saying yes.

Dr. Kristen Okamoto, thank you for coming on board during your first semester here at Clemson University. I appreciate your willingness and all of your feedback more than you know!

Dr. Stephanie Pangborn, thank you for bringing out my interest in qualitative research and teaching me how to do it well.

Dr. Andrew Stephen Pyle, thank you for being a part of this abenteuer both stateside and in Germany!

Table of Contents

	Page
TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
LIST OF TABLES	vi
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	3
The Importance of Chinese Students Studying in the U.S.....	3
Influential Factors in Decision Making	4
Decisions Influenced by Cultural Factors.....	4
Decisions Influenced by University Websites	8
Decisions Influenced by <i>U.S. News & World Report</i> Rankings	9
Parents and Students Place Importance on Different Factors	10
3. RESEARCH METHODS	13

Table of Contents (Continued)

	Page
Reflexivity.....	14
Philosophy of Inquiry	16
Data Collection	17
Data Analysis	22
4. RESULTS.....	25
RQ1: Parents Decide Their Children Will Study in the U.S.....	25
RQ2: Theme1, Students Place Great Importance on Rankings	27
RQ2: Theme2, Students Place Great Importance on Location	28
RQ3: Theme1, Students Wish They Focused Less on Rankings	30
RQ3: Theme2, Students Wish They Knew They Didn't Need an Agency.....	32
5. DISCUSSION	35
Findings.....	35
The Role Parents Play.....	35
The Importance of Rankings and Location.....	39
The Role Agencies Play	41

Table of Contents (Continued)

	Page
Practical Implications.....	43
Considerations for Students	43
Recommendations for Educational Institutions and Agencies.....	45
Theoretical Implications	44
Limitations	51
Future Research	53
Summary	54
REFERENCES	56
APPENDIX: Interview Protocol.....	69

List of Tables

Table	Page
1.1 Participants.....	19

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The first major life decision a person makes is selecting the right college (Galotti & Mark, 1994). The importance of making an informed college decision should not be understated. Choosing a college often directs career paths and life long after the college years. For more than 1,043,839 international students, the United States is the destination of choice to pursue higher education (Institute of International Education, 2016). In 2015, Chinese students pumped \$9.8 billion into the U.S. economy through tuition and fees (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2015). Successful recruitment of these students has major implications at the local and national level. Having Chinese students on U.S. college campuses not only provides monetary benefits to the university, but also provides fresh and new perspectives to the student population. From the local level of a college campus to a global scale, this increase in diversity creates a stronger partnership between China and the United States (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2015).

Although Chinese students account for almost one in three international students in the U.S., there are many unknowns about the influential factors behind their college decision (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2015). Previous studies have acknowledged the impact Confucian society has on students' decision-making (Deutsch, 2006; Moy, 1992; Shek, 2007; Tang, 2002). Aspects of Confucian society, such as older people having more authority than younger people and a strong need for harmony, make choosing a college an especially daunting task for many Chinese students because they must balance their own interests with the interests of their parents (Leong & Serafica, 1995; Pei-Wen, &

Yeh, 2005). Effective recruitment of Chinese students to U.S. universities requires a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, social and Confucian familial practices and values of students and their parents (Bodycott, 2009). Failure to understand the values and expectations of Chinese parents undoubtedly affects the recruitment process (Chope, & Consoli, 2006). Research indicates that the traditional Confucian norms of Chinese families are softening and family conversations are increasingly open to children's opinions (Chan & McNeal, 2003; Xia, et al., 2004; Yau & Smetana, 2003). The purpose of this phenomenological study is to achieve an in-depth understanding of the influential factors leading to Chinese students' decision to attend college in the United States and the implications therein for U.S. universities.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The Importance of Chinese Students Studying in the U.S.

Although transitioning from high school to college is a big decision for anyone to make, international students experience a unique decision-making process. Decision-making requires individuals to process relevant information in order to arrive at a conclusion (Harren, 1979). Some conclusions are more satisfactory than others depending on the decision makers' desired situation or social expectation (Harren, 1979). In order to arrive at any kind of conclusion, one must go through the sensemaking process.

Sensemaking involves turning circumstances "into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action" (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 40). The purpose of the instrumental and ongoing process of sensemaking is to answer the question "what's the story?" (Weick, et al., 2005).

Weick recognized that small actions have large consequences. Arriving at a desirable outcome in the college decision-making process is especially challenging for international students who may not know the native language, culture, customs, and norms of their host country (Rowe-Whyte, O'Sullivan & Hunt, 2003). Language barriers are often seen as obstacles to social inclusion resulting in issues such as challenges interacting with professors, discrimination, and difficulty adjusting (Chope & Consoli, 2006; Yoon & Portman, 2004). Other obstacles such as constraints on visa applications, work experience opportunities while studying, and/or the failure to provide necessary language, social and academic support may make affect the choice of a university

(Bodycott, 2009). Additionally, with the high expense of flying round-trip from China to the United States for a traditional college campus tour is likely not an option for many Chinese students wanting to study in the U.S. Not only do these factors complicate the decision-making phenomenon for Chinese international students but also create challenges for the U.S. universities seeking to recruit them.

The international student recruitment market plays a key role in shaping universities around the world (Bodycott, 2009). Chinese students studying in the United States are of particular interest because of China's recent substantial industrialization and Westernization (Xu et al., 2005). As of 2015, China was the leading country of origin for international students in the United States for six consecutive years (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2015). In 2015, U.S. universities enrolled 304,040 Chinese students (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2015). One year later, this number increased by 8% (Institute of International Education, 2016). Thus, it is imperative U.S. universities have an in-depth understanding of the factors which influence Chinese students' college decision.

Influential Factors in Decision Making

Decisions Influenced by Cultural Factors

Cremonini, Westerheijden, and Enders (2008) asserted culture should be considered when studying influential factors in the decision-making process. Increasingly in multi-cultural societies, culture is one of these understudied influential factors (Nora, 2004; Zimbardo, 2005).

Culture is an amorphous term, not something "lying about," but something researchers attribute to a group when looking for patterns of their social world. It

is inferred from the words and actions of members of the group, and it is assigned to this group by the researcher. It consists of what people do (behaviors), what they say (language), the potential tension between what they do and ought to do, and what they make and use, such as artifacts. (Creswell, 2007, p. 71)

One aspect of culture consists of patterns of thinking that parents transfer to their children (Hofstede, 1984). Previous studies suggested that the parental influence on their child's college decision is consistent with traditional Confucian roles (Pei-Wen and Yeh, 2005; Xu et al., 2005). The central focus of Confucianism is a strong social need for harmony (Hui, 2001). Confucian behaviors consist of respect and unwavering obedience to parents (Bodycott, 2009; Leong & Serafica, 1995). In return for respect, parents owe their children protection and consideration (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Bodycott further explained why Chinese students often highly value recommendations made by close friends and family. Originating with Confucianism, Chinese children must respect and abide by their parents' rules (Bodycott, 2009). Bodycott suggested the strong emphasis Chinese society places on this belief may extend into the college decision-making process. If a parent recommends a particular university, their child will likely be influenced by their recommendation (Deutsch, 2006). The degree to which parents influence their child's major life decisions should not be understated, especially in terms of education and career (Shek, 2007; Tang, 2002).

In 2011, Bodycott and Lai (2011) identified two main types of students while researching the influence parents have on a students' decision from China to study in Hong Kong. The first were children who initiated the idea of studying in Hong Kong. The

second were those whose parents initiated the idea. The latter type suggests Confucian cultural roles of child and parent are largely followed. Sixty-five percent of students in this study acknowledged that their college decision was ultimately made by their parents (Bodycott & Lai, 2011). The degree to which Chinese parents influence their child's decision to study in Hong Kong is related to their wealth, personal education, and Confucian culture (Bodycott & Lai, 2011). Parents who were more supportive of their child's choices were more often from wealthier cities or had personal experience studying internationally themselves. Although some parents initiated or took subtle control of the decision-making process, others overtly shaped and manipulated the aspirations of their child according to gender stereotypes and the longer-term needs and values of the family (Bodycott & Lai, 2011). Such practices are consistent with Confucian traditions and the values associated with filial piety (Deutsch, 2006). "Filial piety," a key element of Confucianism is defined as "honoring of ancestors and obedience to, respect for, and financial support of parents" (Hofstede & Bond, 1988, p. 15). Although students may disagree with their parents' decision-making factors related to study abroad, in many mainland families it may ultimately be the parents' decision that will be upheld.

A study by Bodycott (2009) found ninety-eight percent of students expressed dissatisfaction with aspects of the decision-making process. This shocking statistic stems from the lack of agreement between parents and students when rating which factors are important in the college decision-making process (Bodycott, 2009). The attractiveness of a university to parents is driven by cultural, political and socio-economic factors (Bodycott, 2009). Previous studies strongly emphasize China's 'one child' policy as a

reason for the “highly ‘familial’ push to achieve the very best for that child in the way of gaining a place in a higher education institution” (Bodycott, 2009, p. 363). Studies of single child families have shown children feel responsible for their parents’ happiness and well-being (Deutsch, 2006). This added responsibility of wanting to appease their parents suggests children will attend the college of their parents’ choice (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Many Chinese parents believe attending college in the U.S. provides their children “a metaphoric bridge to the wider, more prosperous Western world and an escape from the rigidity and closed competitive exam–driven education system in the PRC” (Bodycott, 2012, p. 14). Previous researchers have found that students typically agree with their parents on this factor (Bodycott, 2009; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Students viewed Mainland Chinese higher education as limited in terms of quality of education as well as prestige and felt that a degree from elsewhere “generally would lead to enhanced language proficiency and the development of networks that would help secure higher-paid employment” (Bodycott & Lai, 2011, p. 13).

Cultural systems are very complex and cannot be described in simple terms, as it would take years to understand if one is not born into that particular culture (Hofstede, 1984). However, one primary element of Chinese culture that is important to discuss is collectivism. Individualism and collectivism refer to a country’s cultural position regarding the importance of an individual or a group (Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, Nishida, Kim, & Heyman, 1996). Collectivism indicates people are born into “strong, cohesive groups that protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty”

(Marcus & Gould, 2000, p. 37). In Chinese culture, a person is a member of a family first and an individual second (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Overcoming individuality in order to maintain harmony within the family is paramount (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Harmony is found in the maintenance of an individual's "dignity, self-respect, and prestige" (Hofstede & Bond, 1988, p. 8). Understanding the potential influence that a collectivistic culture has on a Chinese students' college decision is essential for the current study. A student who comes from a collectivist society may wait for directions to follow rather than asking questions during the decision-making process (Greenfield, et al, 2006). Xia's (2004) study questioned the traditional characterization that Chinese families emphasize absolute parental authority and collectivist values more than individual autonomy. They found Chinese parents listen more to their children than previously believed. In terms of decision-making on children's education, parents and children made mostly joint decisions (Xia, et al, 2004).

Decisions Influenced by University Websites

A recent Higher Education Marketing blog post emphasized the importance of a clear and accessible online presence. Few studies have looked at how universities demonstrate their brand through their websites (Moloney, 2017). Websites are a fundamental part of brand communication (Schultz, Hatch, & Larsen, 2000). While this may seem intuitive, the difficulty lies in a number of popular internet sites being banned in China. With Google absent from the Chinese market, search engines such as Baidu, Qihoo 360, and Sogou must be utilized by U.S. universities. In order to accomplish this, universities must work with an approved Chinese agency to create a fully functional

Chinese website. With sixty-eight and a half percent of the market share, Baidu is known as the “Google of China” (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2015). The most significant difference between Baidu and Google is Baidu prefers paid advertisements and content written in Chinese. With a potential market of more than 500,000 Chinese students, U.S. universities should stay updated on further development and seek guidance from regional experts. Marcus and Gould (2000) suggest universities develop multiple versions of their website by utilizing cost-effective templates.

Decisions Influenced by *U.S. News & World Report* Rankings

Another tangible influential factor in the college decision-making process for students can be found online or in print in *U.S. News & World Report*. Hovland and Weiss (1951) studied the effectiveness of communication and audience’s attitude towards the communicator when statements are derived from a “high prestige” source. Although they found that neither the acquisition nor the retention of factual information is affected by the perceived trustworthiness of the source, changes in opinion are significantly related to the trustworthiness of a source (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). A “high prestige” source in the college decision-making process is the university rankings in *U.S. News & World Report*. Every fall since 1983, *U.S. News & World Report* publishes the rankings of most colleges and universities in the United States (Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999). College rankings have a strong influence on admissions ratings for higher education institutions, after controlling for a variety of other factors, Griffith & Rask (2007) found students were more likely to attend universities with a higher ranking in *U.S. News & World Report*.

College rankings impact attitudes towards particular universities in two ways. First, rankings may be viewed as "expert opinion" on the quality of a university (McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, & Perez, 1998). Second, prospective students and their parents are likely to internalize the information represented in the rankings, sometimes unintentionally (Bastedo & Bowman, 2009). As a result of hearing persuasive messages and forgetting the source, even untrustworthy sources may contribute to a change in the audience's attitude (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). This is important to remember in the current study because even if students and parents do not think the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings are important, they may still believe the top ranked universities are the most esteemed in the country.

Parents and Students Place Importance on Different Factors

Although both parents and students see the value of attending college in the U.S., they place different value on the various influential factors in their decision-making. Students highly value tangible features such as a wide variety of programs, language and academic support services, and the buildings and grounds on campus (Bodycott, 2012). Additional studies found that students do not rate the following factors as important in their college decision, (1) knowledge and awareness of the institution, its reputation, and general knowledge of the destination country, (2) cost of tuition, (3) proximity to China, (4) immigration prospects after graduation, and (5) employment prospects (Bass, 2005; Fam, 2000; Hiu, 2001; Hung et al., 2005; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Zhao & Guo, 2002). The aforementioned factors are the most important from their parents' perspective, not

the students'. However, for traditional Mainland Chinese students confronting or disagreeing with parents is seen as a sign of disrespect (Chope & Consoli, 2006). Miscommunication occurs when differences in decision-making are not recognized by university marketers (Chan & McNeal, 2003). While parents are influenced by the perceived socio-economic benefits of studying abroad, students tend to be influenced by the more tangible aspects of college. Deep-rooted Confucian values in the Chinese parent-child relationship have the potential to greatly affect the college decision-making process. However, this cultural fundamental factor has largely been absent in the literature on marketing international education in Confucian societies (Bodycott, 2009). University time spent catering to student needs may be counterproductive if ultimately it is the parents' decision (Bodycott, 2009). On the other hand, entirely ignoring students' perspectives could prove fatal if the decision-making process between Chinese parents and students has become more of an open dialogue. For U.S. universities to effectively market themselves in Confucian societies, an intimate understanding and respect for cultural values is essential (Bodycott, 2009).

Although the majority of students reported their parents eventually made their college decision, there is evidence that students feel they have a say in the decision-making process (Bodycott & Lai, 2011). This finding is consistent with a Xia et al. (2004) study that found Mainland Chinese parents increasingly listened to and involved their children in family decisions. Research indicates that in contemporary Mainland China family discussions are increasingly open (Xia et al., 2004). Decision-making in particular is being made in a more consensual manner (Chan & McNeal, 2003; Yau & Smetana,

2003). The current study seeks to advance previous research and increase understanding of the college decision-making process for Chinese students studying in the U.S by answering three research questions.

RQ1: What factors are most important for students from China to catalyze their decision to attend college in the United States?

RQ2: To what sources do students from China studying in the U.S. attend in order to make their college decision?

RQ3: How do students from China studying in the U.S. reflect on their decision-making process?

CHAPTER THREE

Research Methods

As Creswell (2013) explained, the purpose of qualitative research is to discover and acknowledge subjectivities. The current study describes the college decision-making experience as my individual participants experienced it. To accomplish this, I talked to my participants and recognized that they are experts of their own lived experiences. It is evident in my research design that this study is guided by my interpretive sensibilities as a qualitative researcher and a genuine interest in learning more about the Chinese international student college decision-making experience. The findings of the current study have the potential to affect drastic change in the ways U.S. universities market to and recruit students from China. Through the richness that only qualitative research provides, I shed light on the individual college decision-making experiences of students from China studying in the United States.

This research method equipped me to pursue the type of rich discourse that enables researchers to gain in-depth understandings of the complexities of individuals' lived experience and sense making processes (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). Phenomenological research is rooted in particular philosophical assumptions about reality, truth, and knowledge. In this study, I prioritize the subjective experiences of participants and constitute these perceived realities as truths that matter (Creswell, 2007). Further, phenomenological research situates knowledge as stemmed from and advanced by the subjective experiences of people (Creswell, 2013). Knowledge is gained by listening to people and their perceptions of the world; therefore, in my role as researcher,

I prioritized my participants' perspectives over my own assumptions and lessons learned from engaging with literature. These commitments are evidenced throughout this work by my choice to include verbatim quotes from participants to present their individual perspectives as evidence of knowledge claims made in reflection of this research study.

In this study, I embraced all eight criteria that Tracy (2010) proposed as markers of high quality qualitative research: worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence. As should be clear in the information articulated in the introduction and review of literature, this research is certainly timely, significant and worthy of study. In the following sections, I describe my commitment to rigor, ethics, and sincerity that I achieved through practices of reflexivity, the phenomenological approach that guided this study, and the methods of data collection and analysis methods I used.

Reflexivity

Mason (1996) stated reflexivity requires the researcher to be forthcoming and critical of their role in the research process. Additionally, Hertz (1997) suggested that reflexive researchers actively construct interpretations, rather than just stating the "facts," requiring them to ask questions such as "What do I know?" and "How do I know what I know?" My understanding of the world cannot be separated from my research. I believe that my own lived experiences influence my reality. As a well-educated, white, American female, I remained mindful of the experiences and perspectives of both myself and my participants, prioritizing their experiences above my own taken-for-granted assumptions (Pillow, 2003). Aside from one semester studying abroad in London, England, I attended

schools in my home country, the United States. Therefore, I am not considered an international student. I own that I have not had experiences similar to my participants; I also emphasize that I realize we have much to learn from their perspectives of these experiences. Ultimately, I do believe that our shared experience of living away from home and the process of making significant decisions amid uncertainty while knowing those decisions would shape our lives in profound ways ultimately helped us meaningfully connect with one another throughout the course of this study.

I first became interested in learning more about the international student experience during my freshman year of high school. I attended a small Catholic school in Blue Ash, Ohio. Generally, Catholic schools and particularly ones in the Midwest are predominately white. I was in a graduating class of 137 people, and with the exception of four people, everyone was white. This lack of diversity was not exclusive to my class. In fact, I noticed that all of the classes: sophomores, juniors, and seniors, were predominately white. It was not until I paid attention to the school's recruitment materials that I noticed a large disconnect between the majority of students at my school and the image the school marketed to prospective students. This stemmed from my interest in learning more about the impact recruitment materials and other factors have on one's decision to attend a certain school.

After careful consideration of the ways in which this past experience and point of view impacted my interpretation of my high school's marketing materials, I wanted to learn more about how these materials influenced international students' decision-making and shape their experiences at school. Imperative in my approach to this study is my

understanding of the difference between reflexivity and reflection. Chiseri-Strater (1996) said it best: “To be reflective does not demand an ‘other,’ while to be reflexive demands both an other and some self-conscious awareness of the process of self-scrutiny” (p. 130). Reflexivity is a necessary tool for understanding ethical practices in qualitative research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). This tool is not so much one item on a checklist, as it is an ongoing process in which qualitative researchers must engage throughout the entirety of their studies. Guillemin and Gillam suggested “this is an active process that requires scrutiny, reflection, and interrogation of the data, the researcher, the participants, and the context that they inhabit” (p. 274). Through the continuous process of reflecting on my own experiences as it relates to the experiences of my participants, I was able to conduct research in an ethical and introspective manner.

Philosophy of Inquiry

Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach aimed toward understanding a specific social phenomenon from individuals’ personal perspectives (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). A fundamental belief of phenomenology is that subjective truths matter (Creswell, 2013). The nature of knowledge is critical to this study, because of the subjective nature of reality. Their perceived reality, or natural attitude, is the one that matters in qualitative research, especially in phenomenology. Husserl (1970) explained natural attitude as the way in which each of us is involved in the world. Natural attitude is the effortless, and normal unreflective mode of being that is explored through phenomenological research (Giorgi, 1997). The purpose of the current study is to understand the factors that influence Chinese students’ decision to attend college in the U.S. This epistemological

perspective recognizes the “human experience is complex, is grounded in the world which is experienced intersubjectively, and has meaning” (Mason, 2002). In pursuit of understanding more about Chinese students’ decision to attend college in the United States, I conducted a phenomenological study using in-depth, semi--structured interviews. The average interview time was approximately twenty-two minutes long. This length of time was sufficient for participants for respond to all of my set questions (Appendix) as well as several follow-up questions to learn more about their decision-making process. Utilizing a phenomenological approach allowed me to further understand the lived experiences of people who have all experienced the same event, scenario, or phenomena (Scott, 2013; Yin, 2011). Phenomenology assumes that important reality is what people perceive it to be (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Thus, understanding the college decision-making phenomena for Chinese international students studying in America comes from their own perspectives and lived experiences. Creswell (2013) states in order to access these subjective realities and create a “common meaning” or “universal essence” (p. 76), researchers must directly engage with the individuals themselves.

Data Collection

This study utilized snowball sampling, a method that expands by asking one participant to recommend others who meet particular criteria for interviewing (Babbie, 1995; Crabtree & Miller, 1992). Sampling began by asking a friend of mine, who is a current graduate student originally from China, to send me the contact information for anyone she knows who meets this study’s participant criteria. This initial person recruited

others, ideally producing a sample with sufficient waves of recruitment (Heckathorn, 1997). To qualify in this study, all participants had to be graduate students from China currently studying in the United States. Although the current study is about the undergraduate college decision, there are a couple of reasons why graduate students were selected. First, graduate students are only recently removed from their undergraduate experience and can reflect on the entirety of their time at their chosen university. “An ‘appropriate’ sample is composed of participants who best represent or have knowledge of the research topic” (Bowen, 2008, p. 140). Unlike the participants in both Griner (2014) and Chao et. al’s (2017) study who were students studying in China, my participants actually attended college in the U.S. and are able to reflect on the motivating factors and the sources they sought out to make their decision. Lastly, due to the researcher’s own limitation of only knowing English, graduate students from China will have been studying in the U.S. and speaking English in everyday settings for approximately six years, rather than one to four years.

My goal for this study was to learn from an estimated fifteen participants from different universities. However, this estimate changed to twelve as I continued interviewing participants and achieved a sufficient level of saturation based on their similar shared experiences. Bowen (2008) stated that saturation, an essential marker of quality in qualitative research, is reached when the data is so repetitive that no new information will be discovered by continuing to interview more participants. I felt my interviews reached saturation when asking general questions, such as “how did you decide to study in the United States?” and consistently receiving similar responses. This

is a valid sample because these individuals have experienced the college decision-making phenomenon within the past year or two. As stated earlier, my participant criteria is appropriate for the current study because they are able to reflect on their whole undergraduate experience and share the catalyzing factors and important sources they attended to during this process. The recent experiences of my participants will allow me to learn more about these truths and make sense of them.

Table 1.1

Participants

<u>#</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>University</u>	<u>Major</u>	<u>Length of Interview in Minutes</u>
1	F	Agnes Scott College Georgia Tech	Chemical Engineering	25
2	F	Boston University	Communication	25
3	F	Georgia Tech	Chemical Engineering	25
4	F	Georgia Tech	Electrical Engineering	25
5	M	Georgia Tech	Mechanical Engineering	26
6	F	Johns Hopkins	Biology	20
7	F	Michigan State Georgia Tech	Chemical Engineering	18
8	M	Michigan State University of Georgia	Communication	17
9	M	UCLA	Economics	24
10	M	University of Michigan	Computer Science	22
11	F	University of Wisconsin- Madison	Industrial Engineering	21
12	F	Wuhan University University of Kentucky	Arts Administration/ Music Performance	18

Before any interviews took place, participants received an informed consent form that stated I would audio-record and fully transcribe interviews immediately following

our conversation. The participants were also informed that their names would not be used in the study and a pseudonym would be selected to ensure anonymity. This practice protected the identities of participants and ensured confidentiality (Harren, 1979). After participants voluntarily agreed to be involved in this study, I worked to understand my participants' experiences by engaging in one-on-one, in-depth, semi-structured interviews that took place over the phone due to the geographic distance between myself and the participants. In-depth interviews are the hallmark approach to gaining knowledge in phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2007). One of the best ways to learn about other people's experiences is simply to talk with them, and listen. By using this method and speaking to each participant for an average of twenty-two minutes, I developed relationships based on mutual trust and respect in order to build rapport with my participants and invite them to share their experiences in open and transparent ways (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The purpose of semi-structured interviews is to understand themes of everyday lived experiences from the participants' own perspectives. This is accomplished by navigating through a dialogue that is neither an open conversation nor a closed questionnaire (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

My in-depth one-on-one semi-structured interviews were guided by a set of thoughtfully written, yet flexibly structured and open-ended, questions (Appendix). The advantage of open-ended questions is that the participant "has sufficient opportunity to express his or her view point extensively" (Bevan, 2014, p. 137). The flexibility in interview structure allowed me to ask follow-up questions, which then enabled me to gain more information or clarification about the participants' stories. Through participants'

sharing more about their college decision-making experience, I was able to discover several core commonalities and reach saturation after conducting all twelve interviews. Bowen (2008) stated “saturating data ensures replication in categories; replication verifies, and ensures comprehension and completeness” (p. 140). During each interview, I was attentive so that I could truly hear my participants and change the prompts on the interview protocol as necessary. Kvale (1996) likened interviews to the literal Latin translation of conversation as “wandering together with” (p. 4) participants as they invite an interviewer into their lives. By asking open-ended questions during the interview, I enabled my participants to take me with them on a journey through their unique college decision-making experience.

With permission of each participant, which was documented on the consent form approved by the university IRB, I audio recorded interviews. I stored all of this study’s data, including audio recordings, interview notes and transcriptions in a password-protected data Microsoft Word document on my password protected personal computer. As soon as possible following each interview, I fully transcribed each recording. After substantial reflection, I conducted member checks by taking “findings back to the field [to] determine whether the participants recognize[d] them as true or accurate” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 242). Asking my participants clarifying questions such as “Did I understand this correctly?” or “Was this your experience?” validated that the interview answers I made sense of were true to their experience (Ellingson, 2009; Scott, 2013). Implementing these tasks added to the rigor of this study. Pillow (2003) advocated for continuous critique of all scholarship and an acknowledgement that no attempt is a

success nor is it a failure. This stance tasks researchers to conduct more thorough, quality work and acknowledge the need to represent and find meaning that is not rooted in their own subjective assumptions. Further, especially because I do not have similar experiences to international students, I continuously focused on interpreting and understanding their common attributes as articulated in participants' own words (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

This study employed all three forms of ethics as suggested by Ellis (2007). First is procedural ethics, mandated by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). This study treated all participants equally and respectfully, following all culturally specific and relational ethics (Ellis, 2007). Second is situational ethics, the form that deals with important emerging moments that may occur in the process of a qualitative research study (Goodwin, Pope, Mort, & Smith, 2003). Following IRB protocol and situational ethics, Ellis included a third form: relational ethics. "Relational ethics requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and take responsibility for actions and their consequences (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). I built upon my rapport with participants by employing relational ethics. To do so effectively, I valued mutual respect and connectedness with my participants and their stories (Lincoln, 1995).

Data Analysis

Following each interview, I listened deeply to the data (Rubin & Rubin, 1995), transcribed all interviews in their entirety, made reflective notes, and engaged in a "continuing sense of discovery" (p. 227). Data collection resulted in 70 pages of interview transcription and reflective notes. The purpose of transcription was to become

intimately familiar with the data (Thompson et al., 2009). This familiarity allowed me to better understand my participants' stories and lived experiences. As Rubin and Rubin suggested, I analyzed my data after each interview and again after all interviews were completely transcribed. This process reflects what Charmaz (1983) referred to as an interpretive approach to constant comparative method of analysis in which the researcher begins the sense making processes of analysis and interpretation throughout the entire duration of study. Abiding by this rigorous and thorough, while simultaneously flexible process, allowed me to identify main themes that detailed the stories shared by my participants as well as to acknowledge and integrate new themes as they emerged.

From a qualitative perspective, coding is a process aimed to the goal of "hearing the meaning in the data" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 240). Rubin and Rubin described this process as "grouping interviewees' responses into categories that bring together similar ideas, concepts, or themes you have discovered, or steps or stages in a process" (p. 238). Given the phenomenological focus of this study and my desire to understand the essence of participants' experiences, I began with open coding, which involves coding the data for major categories of information (Creswell, 2007). Following this process, axial coding emerged when I identified a "core" phenomenon in my transcripts and notes that brought together the similar experiences shared by my participants (Creswell, 2007). Lastly, I attempted to share my participants' common experiences in a manner that will enable readers to feel as though they are reading a story, rather than just learning from analyzed data. By employing quality research criteria and the subjective nature of truth, readers

will be able to connect with some aspects of my participants' college decision-making experience and recognize differences in this phenomenon.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

This chapter addresses my three research questions: (1) What factors are most important for students from China to catalyze their decision to attend college in the United States? (2) To what sources do students from China studying in the U.S. attend in order to make their college decision? (3) How do students from China studying in the U.S. reflect on their decision-making process? Here, I provide insight into how my participants make sense of these experiences. The purpose of sharing these experiences is to advance knowledge on the college decision-making process of Chinese students at U.S. universities.

RQ1: Parents Decide Their Children Will Study in the U.S.

In regard to my first research question, parents are the most important factor when deciding to attend college in the United States. For my participants, it was primarily parents who initiated the conversation to study abroad and ultimately made the decision for their child to study in the U.S. One participant said he always knew he would go to college in the U.S.

Ever since I was little, my parents have always wanted me to study in the U.S. I think just because it was U.S. education has a lot of colleges that are really famous, well known around the world. Everybody knows that U.S. provides the best education. Also I think it was mostly my parents who noticed the trend of going to the U.S. colleges in China. That's sort of something that everybody was doing in Shanghai especially. Lot of people wanted to send their kids to the U.S.

and then use it as a way to hopefully move to the U.S. someday. I think that was the mentality behind it. Then because I grew up under this thought I always knew that I was going to study in the U.S.

When asked how he decided to study in the United States, one participant said, “actually that's my dad's decision.” Like many of my participants’ parents, his dad “felt like the education (in the U.S.) is more advanced than what we have back in China. He also wants me to experience a different culture.” Another participant said his parents also believed higher education in the United States is “superior” to Chinese colleges. He grew up hearing his parents say, “the United States has some best colleges in the world.” He recalls feeling “overwhelmed by how some of the universities are so prestigious.”

Another participant described the short and long term benefits of receiving an education in the United States that her parents used as reasoning for their decision. When asked how she decided to study in the U.S., she said, “at first, there were several long term reasons that my parents thought education in the U.S. was better. And short term, I was just trying to avoid the college entry exam, which is super competitive in China.”

Another participant explained the difference between the quality of high school education in China versus the United States and how that impacted his parents’ decision to encourage him to study abroad.

My parents just decided to send me to a foreign country for college. Because in China the system is kind of, you know, you have to put a lot of work in high school and then in university and most of the time, university is not very- it has kind of a lower education than in the U.S. But here in the U.S. I think that

education in college is more advanced, and you can actually learn more of the skills and activities other than academic, so my father thinks that is a very good experience for me so he decided that I would go.

The parents of participants in this study made their child's decision to study in the United States. This decision seemed rooted in the belief that higher education in the U.S. is more challenging and thus superior to universities in China. Additionally, Chinese parents seemed to believe their children would benefit from experiencing a culture different from their own.

RQ2: Theme 1, Students Place Great Importance on Rankings.

Although parents are students' most influential factor when determining whether or not to study in the U.S., parents contribute little in regard to deciding which particular university to attend nor do parents have knowledge about the college application process or the sources to utilize when making this important decision. In my participants' experience, the task of applying to colleges and determining which factors are most significant was solely their responsibility. According to my participants, the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings were unanimously ranked the most influential factor when deciding which college to attend. Universities ranked among the top 50 in *U.S. News & World Report* are seen as prestigious schools that, according to one participant almost guarantee numerous job offers, because they are "good, top-notch colleges, well-known, reputable. Once I get a degree, it should be a brand that I can communicate to the employer. So when you say you went there, they want to hire you immediately."

One participant proposed that “most Chinese students really care about the U.S. ranking.” Another participant explained just how important rankings were to her and her parents: “The huge trend among Chinese students is looking at the rankings. My parents were like ‘We’re not going to pay for school unless you get into a top 50 according to *U.S. News & World Report*.’” Another participant said he only “focused on the top 30 schools.” For some, the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings are the only source to which they attend. One participant said “since most Chinese students only check the *U.S. News & World Report*, we don't know a lot of about the college.”

Another participant’s college decision-making process began by looking at the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. From the list of ranked schools, she determined which universities had the lowest tuition. Her reasoning:

If I think of getting a job after I graduate, I feel like I should make more money than what I paid for college. If I go to University of Columbia, I don't think I can earn that much money. So, I don't think it's a good choice for me to go to that school.

Another participant explained her decision-making process started by looking at the rankings, and then only after receiving an offer from these schools, “then she will consider whether it’s easy for me to look for a job in the city once I graduate.” So while getting job offers upon graduation is important to my participants, it is a factor contingent on getting into a top ranked university.

RQ2: Theme 2, Students Place Great Importance on Location.

In addition to US News rankings, my participants placed great importance on the location of the university. Although the significance of location is only considered after a

university is deemed a top ranked school by *U.S. News & World Report*, location is an influential factor that encompasses both climate and geographic region. One participant described the process this way:

I think once we get the offer from these schools, we will consider the tuition fee, the environment, the climate of the region. Is it a big city or just a small town?

The weather? Is it easy for us to look for a job in the city once we graduate?

An Economics major at UCLA said he looked at the rankings, “but didn't have enough information on the employment factor, job scenario, or jobs in this area.”

Although he loved his college experience, in hindsight, he recognizes the importance location has on the college decision. With his major in particular, he wishes he considered universities on the east coast.

Because well, UCLA is located in a weird part of the country. LA is obviously the second largest city in the US, but I studied in business economics. So in terms of business jobs, there were actually not a lot of big names or consulting firms located in LA... Everything is actually on the east coast. So the east coast would have a whole lot more finance jobs. It would be so much easier to get a job there.

Upon receiving admission to a university, one participant said she “took into consideration the geographical locations. Since I lived in a southern place in China, I do prefer to live in a warmer place.” Another participant also mentioned the warm weather because “it’s pretty much like my hometown in China. So, I think [Georgia Tech] is a better choice for me.” Although my participants attended schools across the United States, including northern regions, the only participants that mentioned weather as an

important factor attended universities in warmer climates. One participant said, “places like Atlanta or the south have nice weather.” Another said his “overall experience at UCLA has been great. I mean it's a great city, the weather and everything was great... But now that I'm in New York, I definitely miss LA so badly.” Another concurred, “I prefer the school located at some place that is warm. I don't like to be living in a very cold place.”

Location also comprises of job opportunities upon graduation. One participant said she thought about job opportunities in the summer.

My university is close to certain companies. If you want to get into that company, there's a high chance that the company prefers to recruit from the local university, so they might have lots of alumni working at that company.

Another participant had a similar experience saying:

My favorite thing [about Boston University] is actually the location. Just because of the location, I get to do a lot of internships during the semester instead of like a lot of my friends at other schools they only get to do internships in the summer. So, I actually get a lot of chances to discover my real interests and career direction.

RQ3: Theme 1, Students Wish They Focused Less on Rankings.

For my third and final research question, participants reflect on their decision-making process and offer suggestions to prospective students. One regret my participants have about their college decision-making process is paying too much attention to the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. One participant describes the beginning of his process by

saying “Well, first of course when I pick out schools I look at the- I was very naive at the time- I was like I’m gonna look at the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings.”

Several participants criticized the methodology behind the rankings and yet still heavily weighed the rankings in her own college decision. One said, “We all know the ranking is not fully objective. But that was a standard for me at that time.” Another participant agreed rankings are not always an accurate representation of a university.

I would not pay too much attention to the rankings because each university has its good things and bad things. But I think it’s your life in that university. It’s not fair to say if the ranking is bad, then all the people in that school are bad.

Another participant told a story about her alma mater’s change in ranking during her time as a student and how a local university is misrepresented in the rankings.

I would look less at the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. I think because students emphasize that a lot just because they don’t understand the U.S. education system. And here it’s very straightforward. And the rankings are very misleading. For example, [Boston University] was around #50 at that time and now it’s like #79. But does it matter to me? No, it doesn’t matter to me anymore. It won’t do anything. I know of some schools like Northeastern that actually trick the rankings and trick the whole grading scale system and then got into the rankings just because they want to recruit more international students. And does that mean they have better education quality? I don’t think so.

Another participant's decision was predominately based on *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. However, he encourages prospective students to think more critically about what they want from their college experience.

Looking back right now, I feel the most important thing is not the rankings, because if they just look at rankings they pick whatever *U.S. News & World Report* tell them to pick. They might get into a school that they might not really like. So, they gotta ask themselves what kind of life do you wanna spend in college? Do you wanna squeeze yourself to the extent that you're gonna study every day every night, every second? If you wanna do that you go ahead and pick the highest rankings, but if you're not that kind of person, I wanna be doing multiple activities, I just recommend them pick a school that is less hectic.

RQ3: Theme 2, Students Wish They Knew They Did Not Need an Agency.

Today, many higher education institutions are under pressure to recruit international students (Becker & Kolster, 2012). Students in several countries, including China, the UK, and Australia, use recruitment agencies to help them find the right university for them (Choudaha & Chang, 2012). A recruitment agency is a third-party who is paid to help students find, apply, and prepare for college (Serra Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011). In China, these agencies provide services to students who seek to study abroad in exchange for a fee (Serra Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011). The standard fee for most agencies to manage a student's college application is \$260 (Chiu, 2016). Services include "assistance with student application forms, visa interviews, travel arrangements, insurance, entrance examinations, and other pre-college requirements (Serra Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011, p.

189). Although agencies are a common practice in China, no research has been conducted regarding the costs and benefits of using an agency.

Increasingly, the decision to study abroad is one of the most significant and expensive decisions students assume (Mazzarol, 1998). Alongside a desire to have focused less on rankings and more on campus life, a few participants described their experiences using agencies. For some, the agencies played a vital role in the college decision-making process, especially in regard to filling out applications. One participant stated, “at the time, [I] couldn’t apply without an agency.” The role of an agency is to help international students apply to universities, sign up for the SAT/ACT, upload transcripts, and keep track of their application status. Another participant further explained how much students like her rely on agencies, because “most of the parents don't know English, most of our teachers don't know English, so most people would use the agency to help.”

Agencies are perceived as necessary to the process of applying to U.S. universities, because according to one participant “we're not really familiar with the education flow.” At the time of applying to college, most participants felt agencies were the only resource available to them. However, upon reflecting on this opinion, they feel the agencies are over-priced and provide minimal support. One participant said “they're not really that useful and when I look back I think all they've got is that they know people in the admission offices, but that still doesn't help that much.”

Another participant who was really interested in receiving an acceptance into an Ivy League described the fear that agencies would only help him apply to “safety schools” or schools that had a low quality of education and a high admission rate.

One big fear that agents were just going to throw us into whatever colleges were easiest to get into. I think what they were really looking for is the admission rate. So, they knew if you apply to this school, you are definitely going to be accepted. So, I think probably just going to the safe choice, but not a really great university.

Although this large fear loomed over him, he felt he had no choice but to use an agency.

I had no interaction with the U.S. whatsoever. I had no idea how everything works. So, I used agency to help me with the administrative stuff, like how do I submit stuff, what's the stuff that I need. But, I mostly did all my essays on my own. They just reviewed it.

Another said her school did not help students apply to colleges, so she had to use an agency. When asked what the agency did for her, she responds: "They help you do your personal statement, and what kind of files the university needs to apply. I think the agency cost us \$4,064 and I applied to eight schools." It is because of the power imbalance between agencies and students as well as the expensive fees dictated by the agencies that my participants desire a change in this portion of their college decision-making process. Today, agencies seem like a necessary evil for students who want to attend college in the U.S.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

By answering these three research questions, (1) What factors are most important for students from China to catalyze their decision to attend college in the United States? (2) To what sources do students from China studying in the U.S. attend in order to make their college decision? and (3) How do students from China studying in the U.S. reflect on their decision-making process?, this study aimed to fill gaps in international student decision-making research. Four important findings emerged from my data: (1) Chinese parents catalyze their child's decision to attend college in the United States. (2) The most influential sources in the decision to attend a particular university are the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings and the university's location. (3) In hindsight, students wish they focused less on rankings and (4) students wish they did not spend the money on assistance from agencies. My results shed light on the strong influence parents and *U.S. News & World Report* rankings have on Chinese students' college decision, and the factors students wish they would have attended to more and less. This section will connect the findings of the current study to previous academic research.

Findings

The role parents play. The current study builds upon previous research conducted by Griner (2014) and Chao, Hegarty, Angelidis, and Lu (2017). Both of these studies conducted quantitative research and utilized surveys to ask questions about the factors that motivate Chinese students to study abroad. Griner (2014) found five motivational factors which include personal dynamic, reverse motivation, parental influence,

globalization persuasion, and outlying factors. While Chao et. al. (2017) found gaining a new perspective on one's own country and a superior educational system overseas as the most important factors when deciding to study abroad. Unlike the current study, both Griner (2014) and Chao et. al, (2017) surveyed Chinese students who were currently in their home country of China rather than the U.S. My participants made the decision to study in the U.S., experienced studying in the U.S., and attested to the specific factors that drove their decision-making.

Although both studies found motivational factors for these students to study in the U.S., their participants have not yet made their own college decision. Therefore, their participants cannot personally speak to the motivating factors that influence their decision to study in the U.S. rather than their home country of China. The motivating factors discussed in both of these studies may not be enough to catalyze one's decision to study abroad. Griner (2014) recognizes that because of the importance placed on filial piety in Chinese culture, it is not surprising that parents are a major factor which influence Chinese students' college decision. However, the current study found that parents are the single most influential factor when catalyzing the decision to attend college in the U.S. While there are other motivational factors, this study suggests that parents are ultimately the decision-makers. While Griner (2014) and Chao et. al.'s (2017) findings listed important factors in the college decision-making process, these factors may not actually be enough of a motivating factor to recruit Chinese students to attend college in the U.S. Thus, the findings of the current study that suggest parents are the catalyst of the college decision-making process for their children is an important result with implications for

prospective students and current practitioners. Such implications include elements of both communication channel and content.

In the current study, RQ1 addresses participants' most important factor when deciding to attend college in the U.S. is not their decision at all. It is their parents' decision. Bodycott and Lai's (2011) findings of two main types of students can be seen in the current study: students who initiate the conversation to study abroad and students whose parents initiate the conversation. As stated earlier in the literature review, the second type of student suggests Confucian cultural roles between parent and child are substantial. "Filial piety," a key element of Confucianism is evident in the current study in the form of parents deciding their children will study abroad in the United States. The financial support aspect of filial piety is also apparent because all of my participants' parents paid for tuition. When asked what some of the biggest challenges are during the college decision-making process, one participant attempted to describe how he felt.

To go in this path, we actually put a lot of pressure on parents. I mean they were very supportive. They're extremely supportive and they didn't even complain about the economics issue. It's just me myself feels sort of- I wouldn't say guilt, but sort of. I don't know how to describe the feeling. But they didn't say anything, they were very positive with this whole process, so I'm very glad.

Other participants noted that their parents never set a maximum tuition they were willing to pay. However, out of respect, students often chose the least expensive university in the top 30 rankings.

I use major rankings because I wanna go to engineering school, so look at the engineering rankings, and I just look at the tuitions, if from top to bottom I take out some of the lowest tuition schools. First, MIT is so expensive that I didn't apply for it and I came to the bottom and I found this school called Georgia Tech that's relatively cheap.

Another participant said her parents never said it, but she “personally doesn’t want (her parents) to pay that much for education because I’m not comfortable- I don't think it's worth it.”

China is a country that places great importance on filial piety, respect for elders, and education; it is no surprise that parents play a large roll in a Chinese students’ decision to study in a foreign country. Griner (2014) found students whose parents are knowledgeable about study abroad and international experiences place greater interest on the experience. While parents with knowledge of study abroad may place a higher emphasis on the potential to be educated overseas than parents who know nothing about it (Yi, 2001), the current study describes a different kind of parent -- those who are solely responsible for their child’s decision to attend college in the United States. And yet, after that decision is made, all of my participants’ parents are absent in the rest of the decision-making process. None of my participants’ parents know English, have ever spent time in the United States, or know anything about the college admissions process. After the parents decided their child was going to study in the U.S., it was the child’s responsibility to then decide at what sources of information to look, which factors are important, and to which schools to apply.

Prior research does not provide information about the actual family communication processes that occur during the college decision-making process (Bodycott & Lai, 2011). Information such as the roles parents play and the resources they provide their children is important to further understand what influences Chinese students' decision to study in the U.S. Although most students feel agencies are necessary in assisting with college applications because their parents do not know English or understand the application process, it is imperative to understand the impact parents have on the students' decision to attend college in the United States.

The importance of rankings and location. Regarding RQ2, the sources students attend to in order to make their college decision include U.S. News & World Report rankings as well as available sources, such as university websites, that provide information about location. U.S. News & World Report rankings strongly influenced my participants' decisions about which university to attend. Some participants only “applied to top 30 schools” or “focused only on the top 50.” One participant said, “I know I’m going to study science- engineering. So, I’m looking for a major ranking.” The rankings suggest an overall positive image of an educational institution (María Cubillo, Sánchez, & Cerviño, 2006). A university with a positive image is determined by factors such as its academic reputation, quality of teaching, and attractiveness of its campus (Mazzarol, 1998). These factors which are indicative of a desirable university are difficult to quantify and thus in the past few years, the methodology behind the U.S. News & World Report rankings has been highly criticized (Ehrenberg, 2005; Rocki, 2005). It is seemingly impossible to accurately measure the quality of a single institution and academic

institutions nationwide, while factoring in “external funding, numbers of articles and books written by faculty members, library resources, the proportion of faculty members with advanced degrees, quality of students, and quality of teaching” (Altbach, 2015, p. 2). Additionally, “if rankings are problematic nationally, they present even more challenges globally” (Altbach, 2015, p. 3). Whether or not the methodology behind their rankings is flawed, Chinese students may not understand the complex nature of the ranking system that reduces entire institutions to a mere number. This has vast implications, especially for prospective students currently thousands of miles away in China with a desire to study in the U.S.

Due to the challenges of quantifying all of the factors that make a university great, the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings should be a reference tool, rather than a prominent source in one’s college decision. Location is another important aspect of college to consider, one that my participants placed a great amount of importance on. Location encompasses a variety of factors, including personal preferences on warm versus cooler temperatures, urban versus suburban campuses, and other universally important location-determined factors. This is not unique, as students from around the world consider factors such as “local transportation, cost of living, weather, social and cultural life” (Serra Hagedorn, & Zhang, 2011, p. 189). Although universities located in major cities have a higher cost of living, there are more job opportunities (Jiang, 2015). Social life at a university is related to its surroundings, although one study found factors such as “safety, security, and sports facilities are considered less significant” (María Cubillo, Sánchez, & Cerviño, 2006, p. 11).

The universal importance students place on a university's location and, despite criticism, the high level of prestige behind *U.S. News & World Report* rankings during the college decision-making process should not be overlooked. It is seemingly impossible to accurately quantify the quality of an entire university, thus the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings may be seen as simple. The simplicity of rankings may be easily ignored, especially by prospective students currently in China, because of the difficult nature of the college decision-making process for international students. Griner (2014) found that most international students "admit that if the process for study abroad were not so complex, they would maintain a larger interest in the subject" (p. 12). Although my participants' college decisions were heavily influenced by rankings and location, it is advisable to take advantage of a variety of informational sources.

The role agencies play. This study's third and final research question asked participants to reflect on their college decision-making process. A major finding came from participants' acknowledging the need for agencies to help international students apply to college and a desire for this to change. The decision to study abroad is a complex and expensive one (María Cubillo, Sánchez, & Cerviño, 2006). In a 2014 Forbes article titled "The Chinese Are Willing To Pay \$60,000 For A College Application," Chinese students applying to universities in the United States explained the role of agencies and the ways in which they are perceived helpful. Agencies "introduce Asian students to the American education system and culture; help students target their safety and reach schools; and brainstorm personal essay ideas and polish their writing, among others" (Ni, 2014, p. 1). Serra Hagedorn and Zhang (2011) discovered the most popular reasons

students use agencies to include a lack of knowledge on the college application process and the visa application process as well as a lack of information about foreign universities.

Agencies provide a service, whether necessary or not, for students seeking to study abroad. Peggy Blumenthal, a senior counselor to the president at the Institute of International Education, understands why Chinese parents and students use agencies, but she believes they are not indispensable. With all of the free information available online, she says “a student that's smart enough to come to the U.S. and get into college is smart enough to navigate the admission process all by themselves” (Shen & Hunt, 2015). Further, not all agencies behave ethically (Serra Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011). From accepting money from both the students and universities seeking to recruit them to purposely painting inaccurate pictures of universities, agencies are more of a cause for concern than a helpful resource for students.

While several reports throughout the past eight years have surfaced about agencies cheating students' way into some of the United States' top ranked universities, this subject never came up in any of my interviews (Altbach, 2009; Ni, 2014; Shen & Hunt, 2015). Students from China looking to study in the U.S. should research the ability and knowledge of an agency in order to prevent using an irresponsible agent (Sharma, 1997). This is an inherently difficult task because the agency has more power than the students and their parents (Serra Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011). The agencies provide services and recommend the service type and the extent to which it is needed, leading to information asymmetry (Sharma, 1997). This power imbalance of information is what led

to one of my participants' parents forbidding her from using an agency when applying for colleges. She says an agency was

One thing that my parents fully rejected. At that time I would say the agencies weren't very professional... There was a lot of information asymmetry and they charge you a lot. I would say like \$10,000 just for filling out all the forms for you. Things that you could do in like 20 minutes.

Practical Implications

This study found several key findings addressed in the aforementioned section. Based on these results, the current section suggests practical implications and recommendations for future students from China who desire to study in the U.S. as well as practitioners, including university employees and recruitment agencies. By sharing the following recommendations, the current study hopes to further educate invested parties about their decision-making and recruitment processes.

Considerations for Students

With a primary and narrow focus on *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, there were a myriad of factors that were overlooked by my participants. From skimming university websites to calling admissions offices and reaching out to current college students, there are several avenues left uncharted. Recommendations for Chinese students looking to study in the U.S. include utilizing several different informational sources available to them. Previous studies have researched the influential factors that drive international students to study in the U.S. Some international students consider the language difference, availability of science and technology-based programs and

geographic proximity to home as influential factors when making the college decision (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Others, like the countries McMahon (1992) examined suggest students are influenced by the size of the country, economic ties between the home and host country, political interests in the host country as they relate to the home country, and lastly, the host country's support of international students through scholarships and other assistance. Griner (2014) discovered the following five primary motivational factors for Chinese students studying abroad: personal dynamic, reverse motivation, parental influence, globalization persuasion, and outlying factors. Some international students are driven to study in the U.S. because the universities in their home country lack prestigious universities, specialized areas of study/majors and access to laboratories/libraries (Chao, et. al., 2017). These motivating factors may not be adequately addressed in *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, the single most important source of information my participants attended to. Future students who seek out a variety of resources that address the aforementioned factors will likely make a well-rounded and informed college decision.

There are dozens of resources prospective students can seek out in order to aid in their college decision-making process. Solely relying on rankings published by a single source, one that is increasingly under fire for methodology, is not beneficial for Chinese students looking to study in the U.S. in the future, nor for the participants in the current study who transferred to different universities in the midst of their college career. Although the college experience was an enjoyable one for the majority of my participants, they wish they had made the decision another way.

Recommendations for Educational Institutions and Agencies

Upon reflection, my participants recognized that the way in which their college decision was made had its flaws. There is potential opportunity for university admissions representatives and agencies to address these deficient tendencies and further inform prospective students in a proactive manner. International student recruitment is an inherently complex, competitive, and costly endeavor. With hundreds of thousands of Chinese students studying in the U.S., recruitment is essential to both the financial health of many universities and the existence of recruitment agencies in China. Moving forward, universities and agencies with a well-informed recruitment strategy and Chinese students who employ multiple sources in their college decision-making process will maximize the benefits for all parties.

In order for university admissions representatives and other invested parties, like agencies, to implement best practices in recruiting international students, they must first understand how students go about the college decision-making process. McMahon (1992) defined three stages in which the college decision-making process occurs. First, students must decide to study in a foreign country. Second, students must look at the factors that make the host country more desirable than their home country. And third, the student chooses a particular university. A large takeaway from the current study is the participants present a unique circumstance by having their parents dictate the first two steps of the decision-making process. Although prior studies have shown parents of students from Indonesia and Taiwan are strong influencers, it is unknown whether they make their child's decision for them (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Meanwhile, the current study

suggests Chinese parents play an integral role in this process by making their child's decision to study abroad for them.

A deeper understanding of global mobility trends and their relationship to the applicant pipeline will help institutions channel their efforts. Institutions need to invest in understanding the decision-making process of their prospective students and monitor the effectiveness of their recruitment channels. (Choudaha & Chang, 2012, p. 18)

Once practitioners understand the stages of the college decision-making process, they must implement a recruitment strategy. A popular and convenient channel for universities to recruit international students is through the internet by way of university websites and social media. A simple source for communicating with prospective international students is through the university's official website. On the website, prospective students should be able to find specific and concise information about the university and how to apply. If a university website is not easily accessible or its content is difficult to comprehend or even find, then students may not bother to decipher whether or not it is the right fit for them. Another online platform admissions representatives can employ to engage with prospective students is social media. Social media is a cost effective resource with four unique advantages often utilized by universities around the globe today (Choudaha & Chang, 2012). The relevance, speed, cost, and personalization of social media platforms allow for a space where admissions representatives and prospective students can connect (Choudaha & Chang, 2012).

Although university websites are a one-stop-shop for finding information about a university and social media allows admissions representatives to interact with prospective students, a different approach may need to be taken in order to recruit international students (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011). “Effective recruitment is key to international competition. Although promotional videos, university Web sites and interactive online approaches can reach a large pool of students in a cost-effective way, many international students in target markets favor a physical presence” (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011, p. 7). This strategy, albeit effective, is an expensive one.

Students can learn more about a university by meeting with an admissions representative or a current student at that school. By hearing from someone within the campus culture, prospective students may gain valuable insights into the important, intangible factors that make a university great. However, this is highly unlikely for international students, because campus visits and face-to-face interactions with university representatives and students require booking an expensive flight, lodging, and other travel logistics. Zhang & Hagedorn (2011) recommend universities use local agents. Although it is untested, connecting Chinese recruitment agencies with U.S. universities can be an advantage for everyone involved. First, U.S. university admissions representatives should ask “How can the use of a third-party agent be supervised so that students’ interests, as well as the accountability of the institution, can be guaranteed at all stages of the recruitment process?” (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011, p. 16). In order for agencies to move forward with little to no ethical issues, they must make several changes. These changes include full disclosure of knowledge regarding universities and their fees.

By choosing to disclose accurate information to students, the power imbalance between them will diminish and trust will increase. If local agents are implemented properly, they have the potential to dramatically increase international student enrollment at U.S. universities by providing the prospective students with their desired physical presence recruitment approach. This, alongside more concise content and easy to follow university website layouts and targeted social media campaigns are among the best practices for admissions representatives today.

U.S. universities interested in recruiting Chinese students need to harness an understanding of different cultural practices when designing their marketing plans. Similarly, agencies must take into consideration what parents want from their child's university. The findings of the current study suggest practitioners take parents into special consideration, as they are the ones who catalyze their child's decision to study abroad. It is critical that U.S. university admissions representatives and agencies keep their eyes on developments and cultural shifts (Chan & McNeal, 2003). As China increasingly opens itself to the world there may be a change in the way families engage and interact in relation to the decision to attend college in the U.S.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of the current study advance knowledge of organizational communication theory, particularly sensemaking. Through interviews with students originally from China who attended college in the U.S., this study explores the college decision-making process of twelve individuals and articulates how they each make sense of their choice of school based on motivating factors and the sources that were most

influential in this process. Additionally, this study asked participants to reflect on their decision-making process. This introspective sensemaking process allowed my participants to provide insights to what they wish they would have done differently. By comprehending their own college decision-making process explicitly in words, my participants' experiences serve as the "springboard into action" for future students to make a more informed college decision (Weick, et al., 2005, p. 40).

Sensemaking is action and future oriented (Weick, et al., 2005). It begins when a person asks "what's the story here?" and progresses to then ask "now what should I do?" (Weick, et al., 2005, p. 410). In the context of the current study, I asked my participants to share the story of their college decision-making process. All of my participants' decision-making process began when their parents stated they were going to attend college in the U.S. From there, my participants sought out information about individual universities by employing *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, university websites, and recruitment agencies. From these resources, participants made sense of what kind of university they were interested in attending. They considered factors such as rankings, weather, surrounding area, and employment opportunities upon graduation. Going through the sensemaking process allowed my participants to make their college decision and ultimately articulate their decision and sensemaking process in the current study.

The findings of this study indicate Confucian societal roles play a major role in the decision-making process for Chinese students. Prior studies suggest decision-making between Chinese parents and children has become more of an open discussion rather than a dictation from parents (Chan & McNeal, 2003; Xia, et al., 2004; Yau & Smetana, 2003).

However, all of my participants' parents decided their child would study in the U.S. My participants did not decide this for themselves, nor did they have a say in whether or not they would attend a university in China or the U.S. The influence of culture in Chinese students' decision-making is different from many students in Western countries, who are more individualistic than collectivistic (Gudykunst, et al, 1996). In the current study, there is no doubt parents played a key role in my participants' decision to attend college in the U.S. However, it remains to be seen how Confucian societal roles affect the sensemaking process of sifting through various resources in order to arrive at the decision of which particular U.S. university to attend. Still, the current study provides important insights about sensemaking regarding how Confucian societal roles between Chinese parents and children impact the college decision-making process and later in this section, provide recommendations and further implications for how future students and practitioners can improve their processes as cultural shifts occur.

In 1996, Choo suggested researchers study how sensemaking, knowledge building, and decision making are interconnected processes. By understanding these processes and how they relate to one another, organizations "will have the necessary understanding and knowledge to act wisely and decisively" (Choo, 1996, p. 329). By the participants in the current study making sense of their own experiences, future students will gain more information on how to make a well-rounded college decision. Additionally, my participants' sensemaking allows practitioners such as university admissions representatives and agencies to ultimately research their goals by providing them with information that will allow them to adapt and continue to thrive in the

changing college decision-making process for international students. Weick et al. (2005) believed small actions have large consequences and the current study supports this. The seemingly small actions of my participants' parents making the decision for their child to study in the U.S. and the decisions my participants make after that, such as what informational sources to attend to and what they consider to be the most influential factors, have large consequences for future students, university admissions representatives, and recruitment agencies. By making sense of their own experiences and sharing them in this study, my participants have the potential to cause change in future college decision-making processes and how practitioners recruit and aid prospective students. Based on my participants' shared experiences and the small actions that culminated them, this study offers recommendations to students and practitioners to affect change.

Limitations

Through sharing their stories with me, my participants allowed me to better understand the influential factors behind their college decision. Although I continued interviewing participants until saturation was reached, I acknowledge my study has limitations. First, I conducted all of my interviews over the phone because my participants attend universities across the United States and face-to-face interviews were cost prohibitive. I believe that in-person interviews would have allowed me to pick up on nonverbal cues that phone interviews do not allow. Second, in order to interview participants from several different universities, I used snowball sampling. This type of sampling method might produce unwanted bias (Yin, 2011).

My sample of current graduate students originally from China who attended U.S. universities to receive their Bachelor's degree is inherently a limitation. This is because they presumably liked their undergraduate experience enough to go through the decision-making process again to apply to graduate degree programs and stay in the U.S. for at least the duration of that academic experience. Additionally, it should be noted, that because of my own language limitation, I chose to interview graduate students because they have more experience speaking English. This may influence findings because Chinese students who speak English at intermediate or higher levels tend to express more interest in studying abroad; Chinese students who speak English below an intermediate level express a desire to study overseas, but are also afraid to do so (Griner, 2014). However, the participant criteria may also be seen as a strength. The current study's participants expand Griner (2014) and Chao et al.'s (2017) research on motivating factors by asking individuals who underwent the college decision-making process and took the leap to attend a U.S. university.

Finally, the purpose of any phenomenological study is to reveal the individual realities of participants. Thus, results cannot be generalized to the entire population of Chinese students studying in the U.S. While this may be viewed as a limitation, it is also an opportunity for future research to include a larger sample in order to uncover more of the complexities of participants' realities during a this shared experience of deciding which university to attend while studying abroad. In qualitative research, saturation is essential to knowing when enough data has been collected and "therefore has far-reaching implications for research designed to produce a theory grounded in the data"

(Bowen, 2008, p. 150). The current study provides more information into organizational communication's sensemaking theory and suggests several recommendations for students and practitioners on how to move forward in their decision-making processes.

Future Research

This study focused on the influential factors of the college decision-making process for Chinese students attending college in the U.S. While my intent was to share the individual experiences of my participants and advance knowledge in regard to the college decision-making process for international students studying in the U.S., I also see ample opportunity for further directions for future research. First, with technology advancing every day, future scholarship should focus on the impact university-driven social media campaigns targeting prospective international students has on applications. Second, future research should pay close attention to how Confucian society is changing. The role parent-child relationships play on the child's college decision-making process will be especially interesting to study in the years to come because of the 2015 elimination of China's One-child policy. Examining the differences in the decision-making process and the role parents play between their first child going to college and their second should be considered as a future study.

Further, according to the current study, the university rankings in *U.S. News & World Report* are still a very influential factor in the college decision-making process for Chinese students studying in the United States. Although it is recommended that students attend to multiple sources in order to make their college decision, until attitudes change or the "high prestige" of *U.S. News & World Report* diminishes, future researchers and

university marketing professionals should be aware of the impact these rankings have on admission. Fluctuating rankings in *U.S. News & World Report* have a significant influence on admissions outcomes and the cost of tuition for both liberal arts colleges and national universities that are highly ranked (Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999). Universities seeking to recruit Chinese students should adhere to the criteria *U.S. News & World Report* requires of their top ranked schools, as this is likely to remain the most important source in the college decision-making process (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Summary

The current study expands upon previous research on the impact Confucian societal roles have on the college decision-making process for Chinese students desiring to study in the U.S. and increases understanding on the motivating factors behind their decision. This study sought to answer three research questions and found that (1) parents are the most influential factor in the decision to attend college in the U.S., (2) students place great importance on *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, and (3) in hindsight, students wish they focused less on rankings and did not need help from agencies when applying to colleges. This study distinguishes itself from recent research conducted by Griner (2014) and Chao et. al. (2017) by interviewing Chinese students who earned their undergraduate degree from a U.S. university. By speaking directly to participants who have experienced the motivating factors discussed in both prior studies, the current study furthers knowledge in sensemaking. Weick, et al., (2005) acknowledged small actions have large consequences. The current study finds seemingly small actions such as parents initiating the decision for their child to study abroad, or students looking at college

rankings have a strong impact on one's decision to study abroad and select a particular university over another. Additionally, this study provides recommendations for both students and practitioners as they move forward in their college decision-making process and recruiting endeavors.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Time of Interview: _____

Date: _____

Pseudonyms: _____

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. I'm Madeline Rafi from Clemson University. I am speaking with graduate students from China attending school in the United States to better understand the influential factors of your college decision. I would like to talk with you about your story.

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. How did you decide to study in the United States?
3. How did you begin the process to find schools in the United States?
4. Describe the various things you considered in the process of deciding to study at your university.
 - a. Where did you seek/find information about these factors? (e.g. university marketing materials, friends, popular press, etc)
 - b. What did you learn about your university from each of those materials?
 - c. Specifically, what factors were the most important in your decision? Why?
5. What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in the decision-making process?
6. What were some of the biggest support systems you found while making your decision?

7. Tell me about a conversation you had with a person who helped influence your decision (e.g. parents, mentors, teachers, friends).
8. In hindsight, what factors do you wish you would have attended to more/less when making your decision?

These questions may be modified and more questions may be added as the interview process progresses.